

An Evaluation of Integrated Marketing Communications Education: Considerations, Contradictions and Conclusions

Introduction & Research Question

This working paper explores the experiences of academic staff teaching Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and postgraduate students studying IMC in the business school environment. This paper is part of a wider doctoral study with the following question, ‘to what extent are current IMC academic practices meeting the needs and expectations of key stakeholders’, The full study will be answered through exploring: How IMC is delivered within postgraduate education in the UK; The experiences of postgraduate students studying IMC; The needs and expectations of key academics, employers within the marketing communications industry and professional bodies. This working paper details the preliminary findings of focus groups with students studying IMC and interviews and a focus group with academic staff teaching the subject.

Literature Review

IMC has created considerable academic discussion yet there is still not one agreed definition. Schultz (2004) stated that “Integrated Marketing Communications is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communications programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences. The goal is to generate both short-term financial returns and build long-term brand and shareholder value”. Two key issues appear to have been problematic in the development of IMC - definition and theoretical foundations. The debate concerning definitions of IMC still continues in academic circles and there is disagreement as to whether IMC is in the domain of the marketing communications mix (Lee and Park 2007, Eastin and Daugherty 2005, Grove Carlson and Dorsch 2007) or a more strategic organisation wide activity (Fill 2013; Kitchen 2005; Kliatchko 2005; 2008; Schultz 2004). A more recent definition is Luxton, Reid and Mavondo (2015) who identify the importance of IMC in helping an organisation gain competitive advantage as, “IMC is a market-relating deployment mechanism that enables the optimization of communication approaches to achieve superior communication effectiveness, which has other downstream benefits (e.g., brand and financial performance).”

There is very little research undertaken on those studying IMC and the curricula that is preparing them for work in this domain. There have been some studies in the field of IMC curriculum development, e.g. Farrelly, Luxton and Brace-Govan (2001) who undertook a study in Australia where they identified content that practitioners expect to see in an IMC curriculum, but this is now rather dated given the changing environment. Other studies have examined what is being taught, for instance, Kerr, Patti and Chein (2004), Patti (2005), Kerr, Schultz, Patti and Ilchul (2008), and Kerr (2009). Kerr has completed significant research on this area and this study intends to build on this. There are calls for further research (Schultz and Patti 2009). Also Faulds and Mangold (2014) question whether social media should be incorporated into the IMC curricula and call for further research in this field as “It will inevitably evolve over the next several years and will likely be influenced by the needs of external constituents (i.e., marketing practitioners), student needs, and departmental resource constraints.”

Methodological Framework

This stage of the study utilises a qualitative approach incorporating student focus groups, a staff focus group and interviews and case studies within 5 UK Universities.

Student Focus Group

This part of the study was exploratory and seeks to identify what students understand by the term IMC and in doing so identify their perspectives, what they consider to be the benefits of IMC to organisations and the challenges of implementing it. From this it will explore whether or not students think it will of value in their future career. The study involved two focus groups. All students invited to take part in the study were studying a core PG IMC module on a Masters programme within one Business School. There was a mix of Home/EU and International students. The questions were drawn from key themes in the academic literature and the discussion guide is in the appendices. The data was analysed utilizing Nvivo.

Academic Interviews

Drawing from the literature, this part of the study seeks to identify and review current practices within IMC curricula and teaching: what is being delivered, how and why; perspectives of IMC; challenges of teaching IMC; contribution of IMC to organisational success and student employability. It seeks to draw out: favoured perspective of IMC based on what is taught, how this differs to what could be taught if resources were unlimited; challenges of teaching IMC and how these might be overcome; likely challenges in the future; gaps between academic and practitioner, what is taught v what is needed? How to close the gap? To date 5 semi-structured interviews have taken place at different Universities within the UK. These academics were selected following a scoping exercise that included a search of IMC modules and programmes delivered

Academic Focus Group

A focus group was held with academic staff teaching IMC in one business school. This focus group took an informal approach and through discussion sought to identify perspectives of IMC, challenges of teaching IMC, contribution of IMC to organisational success and student employability. A “Must Have, Could Have, Should Have and Would Have” exercise was completed to help staff think creatively about what works and what could be improved.

Preliminary Results of Research & Discussion

Students-Understanding the Different Dimensions of IMC & Student Perceptions

Students have identified some key phrases associated with IMC, for example “Organised”, “Uniform” and “Organisation-wide”. These suggest that they see IMC as a way of organising and controlling. There is little evidence of depth of understanding or appreciation of the breadth of the subject as demonstrated in the earlier quote by Schulz (2004). Students were able to name theorists however, they did not highlight the differences in their contribution. This suggests that students have not fully grasped the academic arguments throughout the last 25 years. It was evident that students were aware of some of the key academic models however, there was not a real sense that they appreciated that IMC could be tactical (Lee and Park 2007) or more strategic (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, Kliatchko 2005, 2008). During the focus group students were asked to think about and discuss perspectives of IMC before putting the following words in order – (Best Match with group perspective) Practitioner discourse, Means of one-voice coordination, Media Planning Tool, Theoretical concept, Management Fad (Worst Match). This indicates that students see IMC as something that

organisations do rather than a theoretical subject. It does show that they think IMC is important and that it has longevity.

Students-Perceived value and contribution of IMC to Organisations

Students identify some value of IMC within organisations, for instance “Knowing and having a coherent message”, “Everyone knowing the message”, “Everyone in organisation is brought together”, “Coherent message”. There is evidence that students understand the value in terms of consistency and one voice but also that it can bring more at a more strategic level. Students did not fully address this aspect within the focus group suggesting that perhaps either a) they were not aware or b) they still have little real life work experience in this field. More would have been expected here (for instance, impact on customer behavior and brand loyalty, relationship building, PR, competitive advantage etc). Students also were somewhat quiet on the organisational barriers to IMC citing only, “Managers lack of knowledge re importance” and “Resistance to Change.”

Students-Challenges and Benefits of studying IMC

It was evident in the discussion that respondents were considering the challenges of studying the IMC subject rather than the actual art of studying itself. Students have obviously struggled with aspects of the IMC curriculum, stating that it is “difficult to identify what is good IMC”. They do appreciate the similarities and connections between IMC and other marketing theories, e.g. “Initially it almost seemed that IMC was clever marketing, even common sense, but then realised that many others did not see it that way” and “Overlaps with other marketing subjects and communications topics” It is evident that some students were beginning to think at a critical level e.g. about the differences between IMC and Marketing Communications, and how IMC is integral to other business and marketing strategies. They recognised that it is more strategic than they initially anticipated when they started studying the subject.

When considering the benefits of studying IMC students did appreciate that it gave them good examples of real life organisational situations, “practical, you could see the benefit of theory in practice” and also that it would be of value to them in their career, “attended CIM event - Business people talking about IMC even though they might not know it”, “opportunities to help organisations – knowing that they should be practicing IMC but are not”.

Academic Staff – Early Indications

The interviews and focus group are still to be fully analysed however it is expected that this will be completed in time for the Conference presentation. It is evident however that there are different viewpoints on what should be taught within IMC curricula and the challenges contained therein. There appears to be differences in views on: which theories should be used and to what extent theory should be included; perspectives of IMC; the role of a higher education module; the level of involvement with industry. There is however agreement on: the need to provide students with real life case studies and examples of good IMC; the key challenges of teaching IMC; the impact of new media on teaching and IMC in general. These, and other themes, will be explored further prior to the conference.

Limitations and Future Work

The study is a work in progress. It is recognised that this is a small quantitative study and that findings may not be generalized. The interviews and focus group with academics and representatives are currently being analysed and other primary research completed. It is expected that more results and discussion will be available at the Conference.

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Appendices

Student Focus Groups Discussion Guide

- Which words would you use to explain IMC?
- Who do you consider to be the key academics publishing in IMC?
- Are you familiar with the following academic models? Unprompted and then Prompted – Nowak and Phelps (1994), Duncan and Moriarty (1998), Schultz and Kitchen (2000), Lee and Park (2007) and Kliatchko (2005, 2008).
- Students were asked to think about their own perspective of IMC and then discuss it with others. The group was then asked to agree one prevalent perspective
- What does IMC contribute to an organisation?
- What are the benefits to an organisation of practicing IMC?
- What are the challenges to an organisation of practicing IMC?
- How valuable do you think the subject of IMC is to your future career?

Academic Interviews Discussion Guide

- Who you are, what you do and how your interest and experience in IMC has developed
- Which PG IMC modules do you lead/teach on?
- What do you teach in your PG IMC module and why? This will be reviewed in conjunction with the module descriptor and scheme of work. Favourite IMC books and journal articles?
- What would you include in an IMC module/programme if you had unlimited resources?
- What do you see as the key challenges faced by IMC Academics?
- What do you see as the future for IMC PG education?
- What experience do you have of practicing IMC?
- What challenges do you think those practicing IMC currently face?
- What do you see as the future of IMC in practice?
- How do you think studying IMC prepares students for work?